

**HOW THE BUSH DOCTRINE OF PREEMPTIVE STRIKE  
MEETS THE TEST OF THE POWELL DOCTRINE**

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Lieutenant Commander Mark L. Bowlin, U.S. Navy, is currently assigned to the Joint Warfare Analysis Center in Dahlgren, Virginia, as the Deputy Director for Intelligence. He was commissioned through Officer Candidate School at Newport, Rhode Island, in 1988. Commander Bowlin holds a BA in History from North Texas State University and an MA in National Security Affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School. Prior to his current assignment, Commander Bowlin was the Current Intelligence Officer on the staff of the Commander, United States Sixth Fleet, in Gaeta, Italy.

Major Scott C. Sheltz, U.S. Army, is currently en route to the Joint Analysis Center in Molesworth, United Kingdom, as the Order of Battle Production Chief. He was commissioned through the Army ROTC program at West Virginia State College. Major Sheltz holds a BS in Business Administration from West Virginia State College. Prior to his current assignment, Major Sheltz was an instructor with the U.S. Army Element at the U.S. Air Force Command and Control Warrior School, Hurlburt Field, Florida.

## Introduction

*The gravest danger to freedom lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology. When the spread of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology—when that occurs, even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations. Our enemies have declared this very intention, and have been caught seeking these terrible weapons. They want the capability to blackmail us, or to harm us, or to harm our friends—and we will oppose them with all our power.<sup>1</sup>*

President George W. Bush  
June 1, 2002

The terrorist attacks of September 2001 drastically changed American perceptions of national defense. With the possible exception of the communist states' developing nuclear weapons and delivery systems, no other event has so fundamentally challenged the American sense of security since the United States emerged from World War II as a superpower.

The Al Qaida attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon shattered deeply held notions of American security. Foremost among these was the traditional American belief that the combination of good law enforcement and geographic isolation provided security from foreign terrorist attack. The September terrorism attack also showed that the same forces that deterred state actors such as the Soviet Union and China for over 40 years would not deter transnational terrorists. In the weeks and months following the September attacks, the scope of the threat against the American homeland began to emerge. Americans learned that fanatic Islamists who were well trained and well financed had conducted the well-planned attacks. That was not all. Emerging evidence from multiple sources indicates that Al Qaida seeks to develop or acquire weapons of mass destruction.<sup>2</sup>

As the Bush Administration grapples with the related issues of transnational terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, it has turned its focus on the state of Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein. Although there appears to be only tenuous evidence linking

Hussein to the events of September 11, the administration's concern is that the Iraqi WMD program, in particular its nuclear weapons program, will be used to covertly arm terrorist organizations for attack against the United States or its allies. Although the Bush Administration states that it has not decided what course of action to pursue against Saddam Hussein, it maintains that it is committed to a regime change in Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

As the public debate continues on how to pursue the Global War on Terrorism and what role, if any, Iraq will play in that war, the President has concluded that the United States cannot afford to wait for its enemies to develop and proliferate weapons of mass destruction before acting. This emerging policy of preemption has been named the "Bush Doctrine," and has been put forward by the administration in multiple venues—most significantly during the 2002 West Point graduation ceremony. At West Point, President Bush told the newly commissioned lieutenants, "We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systemically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long."<sup>4</sup> The central premise of the Bush Doctrine as stated above is fairly straightforward, but its guiding implication is chilling. Should the international community fail to stop Iraq's quest to develop nuclear weapons, American allies (and Iran) in the Persian Gulf region would be subject to nuclear blackmail. Of more concern is the possibility that those weapons could be transferred to transnational terrorists and used against the United States. It is a compelling and realistic scenario. However, neither the President nor the Pentagon has yet articulated a clear vision of how to prevent such an eventuality or how its preemption policy will be developed and implemented.

At the time of this writing, it remains to be seen whether the administration intends to follow through on its rhetoric. Accepting, however, for the sake of argument that the

administration will ultimately decide to act on the principles of the Bush Doctrine, it is necessary that it develop its case against Iraq thoroughly and systematically. Overseas, skeptical allies and adversaries alike are concerned about U.S. unilateral action, not to mention the prospect that the United States will act preemptively. Domestically, both the American public and the Congress will need to be convinced that both the action and the timing are appropriate. Neither foreign nor domestic audiences will be an easy sell for the administration to make—even Republicans close to President Bush feel that an attack on Iraq would be a departure from international norms.<sup>5</sup> Placing the debate within an intellectual construct such as the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine would make this task easier for the President. It would allow the Bush Administration to structure the debate in terms of national interest and expectations, and place the alarming prospect of preemptive action within a more conventional frame of reference. As the preemption policy continues to be developed and operationalized, the administration should ensure that its policy passes the following four tests of the Powell Doctrine: (1) commit only if allies or vital interests are at stake; (2) commit U.S. forces only as a last resort; (3) if committing, do so with all the resources necessary to win; and (4) go in only with clear political and military objectives.<sup>6</sup>

### **Why the Powell Doctrine?**

*At the heart of war lies doctrine. It represents the central beliefs for waging war in order to achieve victory. Doctrine is of the mind, a network of faith and knowledge reinforced by experience, which lays the pattern for the utilization of men, equipment, and tactics. It is fundamental to sound judgment.*

General Curtis Lemay,  
U.S. Air Force, 1968

Given the global implications, the potential Pandora's Box, of a second "Gulf War," why not employ a doctrine that questions the commitments before acting? The Powell Doctrine

provides such a measuring stick in a clear, concise manner. The “Powell Doctrine”—a term first used by Bob Woodward in a 1990 *Washington Post* article about the DESERT SHIELD deployment in advance of the Gulf War—is built on the premise that the United States should intervene militarily only as a last resort and then only with overwhelming, decisive force.<sup>7</sup> That doctrine eventually provided an analytic framework for deciding when America should and should not commit forces to combat in the post-Cold War world.

In his autobiography, Colin Powell described how his very own “up close and personal viewpoint” of an unpopular war later translated his own experiences into a nation's doctrine for waging war. In both the Korean War and the Vietnam War, the United States had followed a policy of proportionality that was characterized by restraint because of fear of escalation. It was under this policy that then Major Powell watched his men bleed and die purposelessly in Vietnam. As Powell understood the problem, if you respond proportionately, you allow the enemy to set the limits and level of fighting and you grant it the initiative. Powell learned a lesson for his generation. There would be no more self-restraining, self-defeating proportionality. “First we're going to cut it off,” said Powell memorably of the Iraqi army. “Then we're going to kill it.”<sup>8</sup>

Just after the successful U.S. military invasion of Panama in December 1989, to oust the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, General Powell expressed to a CBS correspondent,

The lessons I absorbed from Panama confirmed all my convictions over the preceding twenty years, since the days of doubt over Vietnam. Have a clear political objective and stick to it. Use all the force necessary, and do not apologize for going in big if that is what it takes. Decisive force ends wars quickly and in the long run saves lives. Whatever threats we faced in the future, I intended to make these rules the bedrock of my military counsel.<sup>9</sup>

Whether these rules were genuine or whether they were derived from Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's tenets for a nation going to war is irrelevant. The importance is

that they have been based upon the experiences of failures in the past and they have proven successful in the present. The Powell Doctrine would find its ultimate expression in the Gulf War. The idea was not to match Iraqi power but to entirely overwhelm it in planes, tanks, technology, manpower and will with the objective of making the war short and victory certain. Operation DESERT STORM attested to this accurate analysis and interpretation as the Powell Doctrine would eventually set the standard of when a nation decides to take up arms and uses its military instrument of power.

The six tenets of the Powell Doctrine are as follows:

1. *Commit only if vital U.S. national interests are at stake.* Vital national interests are those directly connected to the survival, safety, and vitality of the nation.<sup>10</sup>
2. *If you commit, do so with all the resources necessary to win.* This approach has now become a fundamental principle of U.S. National Military Strategy (NMS) with the addition of a new concept called “decisive force.” The NMS defines decisive force as “the ability to rapidly assemble the forces needed to win—the concept of applying decisive force to overwhelm our adversaries and thereby terminate conflicts swiftly with minimum loss of life.”<sup>11</sup>
3. *Go in only with clear political and military objectives.* “Winning” is even more elusive, except in the rare cases of total war. Most wars are limited in their political and military objectives, and it is difficult—the Vietnam War being an excellent case in point—to translate political goals into military ones.<sup>12</sup> Thus it is imperative to know the political reason for being there and what the military objective is. General Powell once told Ambassador Albright that the U.S. military would carry out any mission it was handed, but that his advice would always be that the tough political goals had to be set first.<sup>13</sup>
4. *Be ready to change the commitment if the objective changes.* More simply stated: if the



politicians change the rules, be ready to change your commitments and original plan, i.e., have an exit strategy. During the Vietnam War, the top military leadership never went to the Secretary of Defense or the President and said, “This war is unwinnable the way we are fighting it.”<sup>14</sup>

*5. Take on only commitments that can gain the support of the American people and the Congress.* Reasonable assurance of public support is vital to the success of any military commitment—it is the underlining force multiplier in obtaining a military end-state, “that being success or failure.” Military action need not be popular, as long as it is perceived to be necessary, and if it is not necessary, action still can be sustained if domestic opposition to it remains tolerable to the White House.

*6. Commit U.S. forces only as a last resort.* War should be the politics of last resort. No nation, no matter how rich, can afford to wage war without end. It makes sense for the United States, wherever possible, to use nonmilitary means to achieve its objectives. America’s leadership and economic strength alone are potent tools for spreading U.S. influence. However, there are times when force is necessary—those times when U.S. diplomatic, informational, and economic efforts have failed and the only means left is military force.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, the test of any fixed principle is not how it deals with what has already happened, but how well it applies to the unforeseen and unexpected. Can the Powell Doctrine guide the Bush Administration in a course of action for a regime change and destruction of Iraqi WMD capabilities? Applying four of the tenets of the Powell Doctrine and to the Bush Doctrine, it is possible to see where the formulation of the Bush Doctrine currently stands and where it meets or fails the tests. It is not necessary to draft the Powell Doctrine wholesale, and in any case, a strict interpretation of the Powell doctrine may be counterproductive. As Max Boot

wrote, “So few missions short of World War II satisfy the Powell checklist that, if strictly applied, it becomes a recipe for inaction.”<sup>16</sup> The following tenets, however, are of particular relevance to the Bush Doctrine and will be explored in the next section.

- 1. Commit only if U.S. allies or U.S. vital interests are at stake.*
- 2. If committing, do so with all the resources necessary to win.*
- 3. Go in only with clear political and military objectives.*
- 4. Commit U.S. forces only as a last resort.*

### **The Powell Framework for the Bush Doctrine**

The last published National Security Strategy defined “vital national interests” as “those directly connected to the survival, safety, and vitality of our nation.”<sup>17</sup> The first question from the Powell Doctrine for the Bush Administration to address is whether Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction program poses a threat to the nation’s vital interest and therefore justifies a preemptive strike against Iraq.

During his State of the Union speech given to Congress on January 29, 2002, President Bush stated, “The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens....”<sup>18</sup> It appears that the overriding concern of the administration is the likelihood of Iraq’s gaining a nuclear weapons capability. The justification for preemptive action lies in the threat that those weapons would pose. Without access to the intelligence information cited by the administration, it is not known whether Iraq is close to acquiring such a capability. Saddam Hussein has sought to acquire nuclear weapons since “the early 1970’s...first developing a civilian fuel cycle and related expertise; the weapons program was to

parallel and build off these efforts.”<sup>19</sup> His efforts continued until Israel attacked the Osirak Nuclear Research facility in 1981 and set his program back several years. By the time of the Gulf War, “Iraq had a robust, covert nuclear weapon program, with a completed, though untested, nuclear weapon design. At the onset of the war, Baghdad was perhaps one to three years away from building a nuclear weapon.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, Iraq has been actively developing biological weapons as well. Iraq started the development of the program around 1985, and by 1990 had weaponized over 25 missile warheads and one hundred sixty six 400-pound bombs, which were loaded with as many as seven biological agents. Iraq has admitted to producing over 30,000 total liters of toxic agents.<sup>21</sup> Today, Iraqi actions speak for themselves. By evicting the United Nations weapons inspectors in 1998, Saddam Hussein demonstrated his desire to hide his WMD program. His regime has demonstrated on numerous occasions the willingness to use weapons of mass destruction to achieve its ends. During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, United Nations inspectors found evidence that Iraqi forces had used chemical weapons—mustard and nerve gas—on Iranian soldiers. Furthermore, at the 1986 Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, Switzerland, a British representative estimated, “Iraqi chemical warfare was responsible for about 10,000 casualties.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, in 1988, Iraq was accused of using chemical weapons on the Iranian Army again and on its own Kurdish minority while it recaptured the town of Halabajah in northeastern Iraq near the Iranian border.<sup>23</sup>

If Iraq were allowed to develop nuclear weapons or proliferate any WMD, they could be transferred to terrorist organizations that have demonstrated the capability to conduct complex operations within the United States. Moreover, Iraqi nuclear weapons could be used to threaten the oil-producing countries in the Middle East. In either case, the vital national interests of the United States would be at risk. On the one hand, potentially millions of American lives could be

threatened. On the other, Saddam Hussein could potentially control the economic lifeblood of the United States and its allies.

The second test of the Powell Doctrine to be applied to the Bush Doctrine is the question of whether all nonmilitary means to halt Iraqi WMD development have been exhausted. In other words, are U.S. forces being committed as a last resort? An argument can be made that short of appeasement of Saddam Hussein, the United States has tried all options. It has certainly exercised its diplomatic options exhaustively, in particular through the use of the United Nations.

On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and illegally annexed it as a state within Iraq. Four days later, the United Nations Security Council passed “Resolution 661 imposing economic sanctions on Iraq, including full trade embargo barring all imports from and exports to Iraq, excepting only medical supplies, foodstuffs and other items of humanitarian need....”<sup>24</sup> Since the passing of this resolution, the United Nations has passed 21 different resolutions against Iraq.

In specific reference to Iraq’s WMD program, the Security Council passed resolution 687 of April 3, 1991, which established,

...conditions for a formal cease-fire between Iraq and the coalition of Member States cooperating with Kuwait. Section C ... deals with the elimination...of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles with a range greater than 150 kilometers.... It also calls for measures to ensure that the acquisition and production of prohibited items are not resumed. The Special Commission was set up to implement the non-nuclear provisions of the resolution and to assist the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the nuclear areas.<sup>25</sup>

Iraq quickly established a pattern of obstructing the U.N. inspectors’ access to areas where possible weapons of mass destruction could be housed or assembled. Starting as early as 1991, Iraq concealed the locations of possible weapons and did not disclose the amount and type of material it had for its weapons of mass destruction program. Iraq has also destroyed material used in the production of weapons of mass destruction, thus obscuring the true size of its

weapons program.<sup>26</sup> In August of 1998, Iraq became even more evasive by refusing the UN inspection teams access to sites by stating that they were protected sites or they did not like the composition of the inspection teams. This culminated with the UN teams leaving Iraq, prior to the U.S. strikes in 1998. After the UN removed its inspection teams from Iraq, they were not been allowed back until late in 2002.<sup>27</sup> Since 1998, within the limits of its economic situation and the continuing embargo, Iraq has been unrestricted in terms of WMD development and research.

The third question of the Powell Doctrine to be put to the Bush Administration is “Will we commit sufficient resources?” Despite the President’s protestation that there is no war plan sitting on his desk, enough leaks have come from within the administration and the Pentagon to have an idea of the various plans under consideration. According to numerous articles published by *The Washington Post*, *New York Times* and other papers around the world, the U.S. government is planning to invade Iraq to destroy its WMD capabilities and effect a regime change. The plan calls for deploying more than 200,000 troops for the invasion force. The necessary force buildup for such a deployment would take several months to accomplish, and issues of basing and overflight routes would need to be worked out. This might be called the large force option, but a second, smaller, package has also been discussed. Since the successful operations in Afghanistan, there has been a call for a Special Forces-led operation to change the Iraqi regime. According to a *Washington Post* news article, as early as 1998, U.S. Army General (retired) Wayne Downing had proposed “...conquering Iraq with combination of air strikes and Special Operations attacks in coordination with indigenous fighters.” Some members of President Bush’s administration have called this plan the “Downing plan.”<sup>28</sup> Since this appeared in *The Washington Post*, the Bush Administration has been openly talking with the Iraqi National

Congress (INC) about assisting in the removal of the Hussein regime in Iraq. To facilitate this option, the Bush Administration has reinstated funding to the INC, which had been previously suspended because the INC was unable to account for the funds. Once the INC had established the appropriate control measures, its funding was returned, but at a reduced level.<sup>29</sup> Although the internal Iraqi support needed to change the government is not visible because of the controls imposed by the current regime, it is conceivable that the United States could effectively use this option to bring down the government in Iraq given enough time. However, it is unclear how small special operations teams could ensure the necessary destruction of the Iraqi WMD apparatus. Neither plan in its present form meets the test of committing sufficient resources. For the first option to be truly viable the United States would have to commit the same number of troops if not more than it did to Operation DESERT STORM. Ground combat in urban terrain requires more soldiers to conduct offensive operations. The defender has the tactical advantage and can inflict casualties at a higher rate on the attacker. For the second option to be viable, a true insurgency would need to be active in Iraq. In Afghanistan, the U.S. special forces were able to advise and fight alongside an organized force with its own armor, artillery and weapons. None of this appears to be available in Iraq today, thus making the “Downing Plan” impractical.

The final question concerns objectives. Have American objectives been clearly defined (or will they be)? On multiple occasions, the President and his advisers have put forth the two objectives concerning Iraq: (1) a regime change, and (2) elimination of Iraqi WMD. There is no question about the clarity of the President’s objectives in this regard.

Since President Bush’s address to the United States and the world on September 20, 2001, in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, he has clearly steered the United States on a policy of eliminating the threats of terrorism around the world. Since this

speech, this has been a recurrent theme. In his January, 2002, State of the Union Address, President Bush stated his commitment to combating terrorism as well as defining the “axis of evil” consisting of Iraq, Iran and North Korea. President Bush reiterated his vision for the war on terrorism on June 1, 2002, at the graduation speech at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He stated, “The war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans and confront the worst threats before they emerge....The only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act.”<sup>30</sup> In the same speech he further stated, “All nations that decide for aggression and terror will pay a price. We will not leave the safety of America and the peace of the planet at the mercy of a few mad terrorists and tyrants....”<sup>31</sup> In these and other statements, President Bush has made it clear the United States will exercise a preemptive policy of military action. With his clearly stated policy on Iraq, a unilateral strike by the U.S. military against Iraqi WMD capabilities is a real possibility.

### **Conclusion**

**HERE**If one accepts the premise that the regime of Saddam Hussein will acquire nuclear weapons, then the conclusion follows that the United States faces a moral and constitutional imperative to eliminate that threat. The President is correct in asserting that waiting to act until the threat is developed would be waiting too long.

The Bush Administration placed this issue into the public forum in several venues, but despite the emerging imperative to act, the administration has not thoroughly and systematically prepared the American people and Congress for conflict. In essence, the administration has the right argument, but has presented it poorly thus far. According to a recent *Washington Post* article, until the President has decided on a specific course of action, he will not put his arguments before the public.<sup>32</sup> Although this approach has obvious merits (not in keeping with

the reputation of being a President that shoots from the hip), it cedes the public forum to the opponents of the Bush Doctrine. Every week that goes by sees public support for action against Iraq erode, and it is possible that the opponents of preemption will gain an irreversible momentum. Eventually, President Bush will need to lay the intelligence community's findings on Iraq before Congress and the public and begin to make his case. As can be seen, the Powell Doctrine, or at least the four tenets that have been proffered here, offers a method for the administration to put forth its rationale for preemptively attacking Iraq, as well as identify what other means have been taken, what forces will be used and what the military and political objectives will be.

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<sup>1</sup> President George W. Bush, "Address to West Point Cadets," On-line, available: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>.

<sup>2</sup> On 19 August 2002, CNN aired video uncovered in Afghanistan showing Al Qaida chemical weapons laboratories and testing of probable nerve agents on animals.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Milbank, "White House Push for Iraqi Strike on Hold," *The Washington Post*, 18 August 2002, sec. A, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Bush, "Address to Cadets."

<sup>5</sup> House Majority Leader Dick Armey stated, "It would not be consistent with what we have been as a nation or what we should be as a nation." Quoted in Milbank, sec. A, 18.

<sup>6</sup> In 1986, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and his military aide, General Colin Powell, developed six tests or preconditions governing the use of American military power. Although Weinberger was the originator of these tests, they have become more closely associated with Colin Powell over the years and are most commonly referred to as the Powell Doctrine. This is a practice that the authors will follow here.

<sup>7</sup> Bob Woodward, *The Commanders*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 117-118.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Powell and Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 509.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 434.

<sup>10</sup> William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a Global Age* (Washington D.C., The White House, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.102.

<sup>13</sup> Powell, pp. 576-577.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 351.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp. 318-320.

<sup>17</sup> Clinton, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> President George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," On-line, available: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

<sup>19</sup> "Iraq Overview," Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) Website, On-line, available: [http://www.nti.org/e\\_research/e1\\_iraq\\_1.html](http://www.nti.org/e_research/e1_iraq_1.html).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



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- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Federation of American Scientist Military Analysis Network "Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988," On-line, available: <http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/ops/war/iran-iraq.html> p. 8.
- <sup>23</sup> Op. cit., p. 8.
- <sup>24</sup> Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General "Use of Sanctions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter Iraq," On-line, available: <http://www.un.org/News/oss/iraq.htm>
- <sup>25</sup> United Nations Special Commission Mandate. On-line, available: <http://www.un.org/Depts/unscom/unscom.htm>
- <sup>26</sup> Arms Control Association, "An interview with the head of UNSCOM," interview by Arms Control Today, (August-September 1998), On-line, available: [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998\\_08-09/rbas98.asp](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/1998_08-09/rbas98.asp).
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, "Military Bids to Postpone Iraq Invasion" (Washington Post), 24 May 2002. On-line, available: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A1822-2002May23?.html>.
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- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Milbank, A. 19.

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